

UN committee condemns Australia's Nauru refugee camp

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A United Nations organisation this month expressed “grave concern” about the living conditions inside the Australian detention centre in the small Pacific island state of Nauru.

The Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC) conducted a review of the treatment of refugee children in Nauru, focusing on the Australian-controlled Regional Processing Centre (RPC), a prison indefinitely housing 306 men, 55 women and 49 children who sought to reach Australia by boat to seek asylum.

In a 17-page report, the committee said the conditions in the RPC, combined with the uncertainty of indefinite detention is “generating and exacerbating mental health issues, leading to feelings of hopelessness and often suicidal ideation.”

Citing evidence from the Moss report, an Australian government-funded review published last year, the committee said children living in the camp face “inhuman and degrading treatment, including physical, psychological and sexual abuse.”

The committee said there were also reports of “intimidation, sexual assault, abuse and threats of violence against families” living in refugee settlements outside the RPC.

The CRC’s report noted that many of the children experienced trauma prior to their arrival in Nauru and the “subsequent impact of prolonged periods of living in detention-like conditions” resulted in cases of “attempted suicide, self-immolation, acts of self-harm and depression.”

Also highlighted was the lack of health care services at the centre. This exacerbated the suffering of those imprisoned, as many “have developed chronic conditions as a result of living in overcrowded and unsanitary conditions.” The report added that the main

medical provider in the RPC has no paediatrician and there is limited access to clean and safe drinking water.

The CRC was also “concerned at reports indicating that some international organisations have been subjected to intimidation,” citing the attempted media blackout on the camp via an increase in visa fees for journalists from \$US200 to \$8,000 in 2014.

The report urged the Nauruan government to immediately transfer all “asylum-seeker children and their families” out of the RPC and to find permanent “resettlement options for refugees, in particular, for children and their families” and ensure they are given “lawful stay and reasonable access to employment.”

Thus, while the report detailed the torturous conditions, it directed its recommendations at impoverished Nauru, when the chief responsibility for these prison camps rests with successive Australian governments.

Nauru is a tiny nation of around 10,000 people, blighted by a long history of British and Australian colonial oppression, producing poverty and economic backwardness. After heavy phosphate mining exhausted the island’s resources, eliminating the country’s only export revenue, unemployment levels skyrocketed to 90 percent in 2000.

In 2001, under its so-called Pacific Solution, the Howard Liberal-National government took advantage of this impoverishment to strike a deal with Nauru to build a detention centre in the middle of the island. Nauru became so reliant on the associated income that when the centre was temporarily shut down in 2007, the country lost 20 percent of its income overnight. About 100 Nauruans lost their jobs. About 1,000 other people, or 10 percent of the population, reportedly had depended on their wages.

Since the Greens-backed Gillard Labor government

reopened the camp in 2012, Australia has used Nauru as a permanent holding camp for asylum seekers, refusing to allow any to settle in Australia. Prime Minister Julia Gillard declared that the detainees must have “no advantage” over the millions of refugees languishing in camps in the Middle East and Africa, which effectively meant indefinite detention.

The cruelty inflicted on refugee children, described in the CRC report, was pioneered by the Keating Labor government in 1992, which introduced mandatory detention of asylum seekers, including children. Australia became the first Western country to implement such a regime.

The UN report follows a series of recent revelations and condemnations of the inhumane conditions in Australia’s detention facilities on Nauru and Papua New Guinea’s Manus Island. In August this year more than 2,000 incident reports were leaked, detailing serious levels of abuse and trauma in the Nauru camp. Dubbed the Nauru Files, over half the incident reports involved children.

The current Liberal-National government has not commented on the UN committee’s findings. Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull and Immigration Minister Peter Dutton spent the end of last month in the United States promoting Australia’s refugee policy as the “best in the world.” Dutton reiterated that the refugee arrangement between Australia and Nauru would “continue for decades.”

According to Fairfax Media, citing “well-placed sources,” the Turnbull government is continuing to look for another destitute country in which to dump the refugees. Last year, the Murdoch press reported that this search included the impoverished Central Asian country of Kyrgyzstan.



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